

**CALIFORNIA CONDOR:
PROJECT UPDATE**
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On December 12, at 10:30 am, six California condors left their acclimation pen atop the Vermilion Cliffs, in northern Arizona. The six and seven month old birds stepped into the sunshine and soon took their first, albeit wobbly and short, flights. On the floor of the Houserock Valley, a thousand feet below and nearly two miles away, 600 or so people cheered wildly. It was a moment none of us will ever forget.

The release morning began early for the people involved. The cooperating agencies and conservation organizations arrived on site well before dawn to finish preparing for the expected influx of people and vehicles. Parking areas, registration tents and tables, and electrical hookups for the media were checked and re-checked. Last minute adjustments were made, but it was clear the many hours of planning by the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Bureau of Land Management, Grand Canyon Trust, The Peregrine Fund, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had been well spent. As people trickled in, they were smoothly directed to parking areas and provided information on the schedule of events, and how they could help make the day go well.

And go well it did. Coffee and donuts, courtesy of Grand Canyon Trust, helped pass time till the release. So did setting up countless tripods, spotting scopes, and cameras. Time flew as people huddled together to greet old friends and make new ones, give interviews to the press, and share body heat while waiting for the sun to warm the day. At 10:00 am, Peregrine Fund Director Bill Burnham began introducing the dignitaries and speakers. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt spoke first, followed by Senator John McCain, Governor Fife Symington, and others. Redundancy was minimal, enthusiasm and optimism were abundant. The decade of work building toward the event was acknowledged, and shared hopes for the future were set forth. The project had done more than bring condors back to Arizona; it had brought people together, to work toward a common goal under the umbrella of an Endangered Species Act that, to the surprise of some, does allow disparate values and interests to be respected.

When the speeches ended, Secretary Babbitt led the crowd in a countdown to release. The first hack box was opened, and its occupant immediately hopped to freedom. The other five soon followed, and all began to test their wings. Within minutes, we saw the first California condor aloft over Arizona since 1924. It was magnificent! Soon the birds began moving short distances along the cliffs, flying a few to a few hundred yards, but always returning to the group to rest those weak and rapidly-tiring young wings. Meanwhile, the day became, if possible, even more beautiful with every passing hour, and the smiles on our faces grew wider and wider.

By mid-afternoon, the news had flashed around the world, via satellite and word of mouth. Newspapers followed on the heels of television and radio. The technology was impressive, but even more so was the spirit of cooperation. In these troubled times, when conflict and litigation are the hallmarks of many human interactions, it was wonderful to see agencies and individuals acknowledge each other's values and rights, and work together to bring back something that had been too long missing from its Arizona home. Now, as the condors explore their new home, we need to ensure that this spirit is nourished, and allowed to spill over to other issues, other places. If it doesn't, it won't be the condors' fault.

For copies of Technical Report 86, the Arizona Game and Fish Department's proposal for condor reintroduction, call or write to the Nongame Branch, Arizona Game and Fish Department, 2221 West Greenway Road, Phoenix, Arizona 85023-4399 (602 789-3500). Obtaining a copy from the Nongame Branch will ensure that your name is added to our mailing list, so you receive project updates as they occur.

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The Arizona Heritage Fund: Lottery Dollars Working for Wildlife

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